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In memory of Prof. Dr. med Walter H. Hitzig: A pioneer of paediatrics and paediatric immunology

David Nadal · Felix Niggli · Reinhard Seger

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Prof. Walter Hermann Hitzig died on October 9, 2012, 5 months after celebrating his 90th birthday. An inspired paediatrician, creative investigator and engaged teacher, he shaped several generations of physicians and paediatricians.



Prof. Dr. Walter Hitzig, 1989 at a student lecture, in conversation with one of his patients

As an astute clinician, assisted by newly introduced laboratory methods, Walter Hitzig characterised the most severe inherited defect of immunity approximately 50 years ago. This deficiency first became known as “Swiss-type agammaglobulinaemia” and subsequently as “severe combined immunodeficiency” or “SCID”. Thirty years later, his team was able to cure the first Swiss infant from this lethal genetic disease by bone marrow transplantation.

In the meantime, in a period of only one generation, a small group of dedicated colleagues from Europe and the USA had

developed the field of paediatric immunology into a new discipline. Both the University and the Children’s Hospital (Kinderspital) of Zürich recognised the importance of this emerging specialty as well as the unique qualities of Walter Hitzig and appointed him to the first Chair of Paediatric Immunology in Continental Europe. This nomination rapidly attracted postgraduate physicians and innovative academic guests. Offers of professorships at the University Children’s Hospitals in Boston and Berlin, honourable and tempting as they were, were declined by Walter Hitzig who remained loyal to the Zürich Kinderspital. In Zürich, he continued to elucidate the role of the Haemoglobin Variant “Zürich” and the agammaglobulinemia as part of Transcobalamine II deficiency.

When the younger generation remembers Walter Hitzig with high respect, this respect is also indelibly linked to his exemplary medical attitude. He cared for sick children in a holistic and humane way and promoted an intensive exchange between basic sciences and clinical practice to the benefit and well-being of his patients. This attitude was reflected in his legendary and stimulating rounds at Zürich Kinderspital with very fruitful interactions between the younger, specialised generation of paediatric haematologists, immunologists, oncologists, infectiologists, allergologists and rheumatologists, all emerging from his department. Walter Hitzig’s dedication to the comprehensive care of sick children was also reflected in his tireless engagement in the Medical Faculty of Zürich, the Swiss Society of Paediatrics and the Swiss Academy for Medical Sciences in the fields of Medical Ethics, Family Medicine and continuous medical education. Regarding his own patients, Walter Hitzig possessed a drawer full of reports of unsolved patient histories, which gave him no rest. Many of his patients, who had found the way to him only after a long medical odyssey, remained attached as adults and continued to ask for advice in important questions of everyday life. In response, they received personal letters from their fatherly Swiss paediatrician.

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Walter Hitzig also invested considerable energy in the promotion of the next generation of physicians/scientists in paediatric immunology. In 1986, he convened a group of young senior residents from the important Children's Hospitals of Germany, Austria and Switzerland in the Swiss monastery of Ittingen and founded the Working Party of Paediatric Immunology, known as API. API became an ambitious forum, resulting in common study protocols, numerous publications in highranking scientific journals and the first German language textbook of Paediatric Immunology, and finally culminating in the appointment of over 10 professorships.

The tradition of Ittingen continues. Every 2 years, the API awards a "Walter Hitzig Prize" for the best scientific piece of work in the field of paediatric immunology, which is given to a young scientist under 35 years of age. This newly created research prize complements the existing "Walter Hitzig Scholarships" for promising young clinical

scientists awarded by the University of Freiburg/Breisgau. Walter remarked, modest as he was: "My name is attached to these Scholarships although I haven't done anything for them. However I am delighted to still have contact with young scientists in this way and to encourage them".

Walter Hitzig's seed is bearing fruit. The tree of paediatric immunology and haematology once planted by him in the Kinderspital in Zürich is branching in many directions including those of Infectiology and Oncology, and has now grown to an impressive height. Standing on the strong shoulders of our predecessor, we can now look further and wider, carrying on Walter Hitzig's scientific curiosity and his continuous search for new therapies for serious inherited diseases.

His students and colleagues from near and far will remember Walter Hitzig as a visionary physician, pioneer of paediatric immunology and teacher with a comprehensive and discerning view, as well as a highly cultivated and much beloved personality.